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# Acadiana and the Cajun cultural landscape: adaption, [sic] accommodation authenticity

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ACADIANA AND THE CAJUN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE:  
ADAPTION, ACCOMODATION AUTHENTICITY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts

in

The Interdepartmental Program in Liberal Arts

by

Joseph Jerome McKernan  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1959  
L.L.B., Tulane, 1962  
December 2010

**This is dedicated to my loving wife, Diane.**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

It is imperative to acknowledge the value of the Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture. A great part of the factual information was derived from this source. This is an indispensable knowledge base for understanding Acadia and Cajun culture.

I would also like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Kevin Mulcahy, Sheldon Beychok Professor of Political Science, for suggesting this topic and providing me an ongoing discourse that shaped my thinking. He and his indefatigable research assistants Nicholas Lange, Jerome Newchurch, Hunter Pontiff, Jay Weisman, and Kate Youngblood were essential in shaping the opinions expressed herein. I exempt all but myself from any interpretive errors that might be raised.

## PREFACE

When I began LSU in 1955 I had never heard of Cajun much less a “coon ass” although it didn’t take me long to know who and what they are. I learned that they are a fascinating group of people with a great deal of pride in their heritage who were for the most part changing as were most young ethnic groups in the country from their private societies to their own views of being America.

The Americanization and rebirth of a new cajunism started after World War II “Bernard 2003”. Prior to America’s involvement in the war Cajuns were looked upon with disdain particularly by the northern press. Except for some of their wealthy ancestors who were referred to as creoles, Cajuns had not made any public meaningful contributions to society instead; they were a proud and hardworking people. Many of whom lived in their own smaller Cajun areas of the state for the most part they were poor. But as one of my long time Cajun friends has told me,

Even though we were poor we didn’t know it. Everybody was the same. Nobody had much money but we got up in the morning, played, went to school, and went to bed with a prayer. It wasn’t until many of us got to the schools that most of us realized that we were poor. Private interview Kirby Guidry native of Catahoula parish 8-19-08.

Therefore, although there were wealthy Cajuns, the majority of them were “poor” as Mr. Guidry describe them and basically been that way since they came to Louisiana from their native land in Nova Scotia. The War changed the face of the Cajuns in Louisiana. Their young serve the armed forces and became citizens of the world. When the Cajun veterans went back home, they were changed and Acadiana began to change with them. With the oil and gas boom in south Louisiana followed by the arrival of oil field workers and their families many of whom intermarried with the Cajun population. Acadiana changed again. These mixed families continued to live in the area and their children, for the most part, still refer to themselves as Cajuns. This adoption of Cajunhood by many ethnic groups has continued up to the present time.

However, the real change in a “Cajun World” did not take place until the 60’s and 70’s and the early 80’s; Cajun music and food developed a huge following nationally and internationally. During that period of time Edwin Edwards gave national recognition to the Cajun way of life by defining Acadiana as a region. This was followed by the inevitable commercialization of the great Cajun products and the Cajun way of life. This metamorphosis is still in effect and growing each year, particularly because of the tremendous success of so-called Cajun food. Of course, the sad thing about this tremendous growth of the certain elements of Cajun culture has been to the demise of many traditions. The French language is practically gone; there are very few of them living on the bayous, hunting and fishing, or farming a small plot to feed their families. The pre-WWI and pre-WWII generation commencing in the 1930’s and the “baby-boomers” right after the war were probably the last generations to experience the Cajun way of life. The fact is that early, albeit very romanticized, Cajun culture is for the most part gone forever and instead is supplanted by a highly commodified “simulacrum.” This is despite the efforts of many historians and folk like professionals at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. It may be that we should be grateful for a “saving remnant” of the Cajun way-of-life.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The following points are important for this discussion of Acadiana and the Cajun Cultural Landscape: First, in order to fully understand the Cajun nature and what makes the Cajuns distinct, we must explore their history from the time they arrived on the shores of North America to the present. Without doing this, we cannot truly understand their way of life and where it came from; Second, what and where is Acadiana--the Cajun homeland--and what are its socioeconomic and demographic characteristics; Third, how have folk culture and celebration of heritage mediated Cajun culture; Fourth, why are these traditions manifested in what are primarily familial and customary rituals with a special importance given to a large number of local festivals; Fifth, what is the viability of Cajun culture and Acadiana as a cultural sub-region.

## CHAPTER 1 CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: CULTURE AS A WAY OF LIFE

### Acadiana and the Cajuns: History and Adaption

This essay evaluates the unique history and development of the early French culture of the Acadian region of Southwest Louisiana. This Cajun culture dominates 22 of the state's 56 parishes all of which are located in southwest Louisiana. It is called Acadiana, after the original Canadian land from where the population came, and was called *Acadie* (now Nova Scotia). The word Cajun is most likely a corruption of Acadian, although as will be seen time and again herein, nothing about folkloric tradition can be stated with certainty.

The original French Canadians of Acadia were intentionally dispersed by the British from the North American territory ceded to Great Britain by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1715. This is referred to as *le Grand Dérangement* and is immortalized in Longfellow's poem "Evangeline." The Cajuns were not known as Creoles, which is the name given to the early descendants of French settlers who settled for the most part on the Mississippi River and is also used to denote the Afro-Caribbean culture of New Orleans.

The Creoles were wealthy French plantation owners who took the name to designate their superior status as descendants of the original European settlers. Ultimately many of their slave descendants who were born very light skinned and were given greater opportunities to acquire greater skills in life than the typical field slave. This class- often "free people of color" - also took the designation as Creoles. When this occurred most of the white plantation owners ceased in calling themselves Creoles and ultimately many adopted the reference as Acadian or Cajuns. In present day society, Creoles are considered to be exclusively the light skinned blacks who are early descendants of the white plantation owners and have enjoyed a relatively privileged life within New Orleans society.

The most important distinction is that Creole culture is traditionally urban or planter and Cajun culture is rural and small town. As trappers, fishermen, and farmers (living off the land), the Cajuns were isolated from the influence of modern culture until after WWII. Inevitably, however, the effects of radio, the movies, and television served to undermine the Cajun lifestyle with unfortunate results for their traditional values--especially the Cajun language. Regardless, the Cajuns have largely rejected a thoroughgoing "Americanization." In fact, the pervasive influence of American culture and society may have reinforced feelings of ethnic solidarity and cultural identity among the Cajuns, rather than reducing it.

The ongoing preservation of the original Louisiana Cajun culture was helped by the assistance of the Catholic Church, strong family ties, festivals that celebrated community, as well as a distinctive cuisine and music. Certainly, the Cajun lifestyle and culture was modified to accommodate the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon values. However, the Cajuns did not conform completely to the commodification associated with the American way of life and they continue to retain their culture as a distinct and vital existence. It is an understandably living culture, but one that has survived by continuing to adapt. Furthermore, the revival of identity consciousness in the 1960s has resulted in public policies that promote Cajun awareness.

Although Louisiana teachers were once formally required to prevent children from using French at school, educational and social agencies now ultimately promote the language and culture. CODOFIL, *Conseil For le Développement du Français en Louisiane* (Council For the Development of French in Louisiana), was founded in 1968 by Congressman Jimmy Domengeaux of Lafayette with the public purpose of promoting French language instruction. The region's largest city, Lafayette, has adopted bilingual signs and styles itself as *Le Capitale de l'Acadie* (The Capital of Acadiana). The University of Louisiana at Lafayette has been

extremely active in Cajun folklore studies and the Arts Council of Acadiana actively supports Cajun cultural activities. Cajun music, with such prominent performers as Zachary Richard and Michael Doucet, with his band BeauSoleil, has an international following.

Acadian cultural expressions are not absent of an Anglicized influence and touristic representations; yet there has been a strong element of traditional authenticity. The population is close knit with now little migration and manifests great pride in being Cajun as well as American.

### The Uniqueness of the Louisiana Cajuns

The concept of culture as a “way of life” is an extremely complex and intricate concept. Customarily, the meaning of culture involves aesthetic concerns, such as of art, music, dance, voice, sculpture and the decorative arts. However, culture also has an anthropological side as “the totality of socially transmitted patterns, beliefs, institutions” (The American Heritage Dictionary) and “the distinctive customs, achievements, productions, outlooks of a society or group” (Oxford English Dictionary). Cajun culture is closely linked with the anthropological sense of the term; in other words, it is culture as a way of life.

The most important aspect of this sense of culture is that it allows a basis for the expression of beliefs about shared identity. People who are and have been a part of a culture hold certain things in common and look at the world from a shared perspective. These communal concerns are manifested as unique traditions and expressions. Therefore, culture arises affirmatively to the query of “who we are” or “who are we.” For Cajuns, culture presents the opportunity for identification based on a sense of shared personal identity. For instance, one may speak in a colloquial sense of “sports culture,” “corporate culture” and “ideological culture,” as activities in which individuals have a shared sense of belonging. However,

recreational, occupational and political identities typically play only a small part in the provision of a world-view and the rituals that mark life's passages.

Cultures that are a "way of life" are different. They play a larger role in shaping the big picture of values that determine community traditions, social closeness and individual self-worth (suggested by Jordan, 1985: 51). A culture that is a "way of life" is often territorially based, tradition oriented, all encompassing, and recognized as such by both the local people and outsiders. This is not simply a matter of personal interests, diversion, or entertainment. The Cajun way of life is identifiable through its shared rituals and unified expressive patterns such as traditional customs, carnival, food, music, religion, communal history and an identifiable regional homeland. Such deeply held values maintain togetherness and constitute societal glue.

Cajun Louisiana has been a truly unique area of cultural distinctiveness, one of the few in the United States. (New Mexico with its Hispanic population and culture shares this distinction. There is also a small Acadian area located on the Maine-New Brunswick border, which has, of course, historic ties to Louisiana Cajuns). The status of a "homeland" with a predominant ethnic population, a recognized geographic area, and definitive identity may be the significant characteristics of a cultural region. In other words, there are numerous distinctions between such a collectivity and the residence of large numbers of minority immigrants. "Southern Louisiana is the only recognized remnant of the French presence in the Mississippi River Valley during the eighteenth century. Despite political Americanization in the nineteenth century, rural French Louisiana continued to grow as a distinctively French region" (Trépanier, 1991: 161).

There are certain traits that define Cajun Louisiana or Acadiana. Its population of approximately one million, while by no means small, is hardly large enough to constitute a stand-alone region. The language, an unwritten dialect, is increasingly problematic as a means



of communication or discourse in commerce or education, and is now largely folkloric. Moreover, the Cajun homeland was never a state or an entity like Scotland or Puerto Rico; Acadiana is more a “cultural sub-region” than a “cultural region.” Cajun culture is considered by its residents and most of the state as a distinct “way of life,” which has a long time history of French heritage, while achieving association with the more powerful “American” culture by adaptation and accommodation. Indeed, Cajun culture has enjoyed something of a revival even if the customs revived are of questionable authenticity.

The survival of the “Cajun way of life” continues to be centered around its relatively homogenous, rural social structure with small population centers as well as the maintenance of a stable population. Cajun culture also has a distinct flavor and Catholic taste. With its ethnic homogeneity, population and shared values, the Cajuns have created their own identity separate from the dominant ethos. In sum, the Cajuns have been successful in creating their own niche, that is, “a self-definition that gives them insulation from the dominance of the state’s anglicized society” (Tentchoff, 1980: 238). This Cajun life has a strong tradition of language, music, rituals and celebrations.

The following points are important for this discussion: (1) In order to fully understand the Cajun nature and what makes the Cajuns distinct, we must explore their history from the time they arrived on the shores of North America to the present. Without doing this, we cannot truly understand their way of life and where it came from; (2) what and where is Acadiana--the Cajun homeland--and what are its socioeconomic and demographic characteristics; (3) How have folk culture and celebration of heritage mediated Cajun culture; (4) Why are these traditions manifested in what are primarily familial and customary rituals with a special importance given

to a large number of local festivals; (5) What is the viability of Cajun culture and Acadiana as a cultural sub-region.

As previously noted, a Cajun cultural identity has survived through a process of adaptation and accommodation. The question that must be addressed is whether this cultural “dualism” constitutes a legitimately authentic or a commercialized front or to put it another way; is this a fusion culture or a commodified imitation? Accordingly, what represents Cajun cultural authenticity is highly debated and not a contentious issue with strong social and political implications.

## CHAPTER 2 WHAT CONSTITUTES CAJUN AND “CAJUNNESS”: ETHNICITY OR IDENTITY

### Le Grand Dérangement

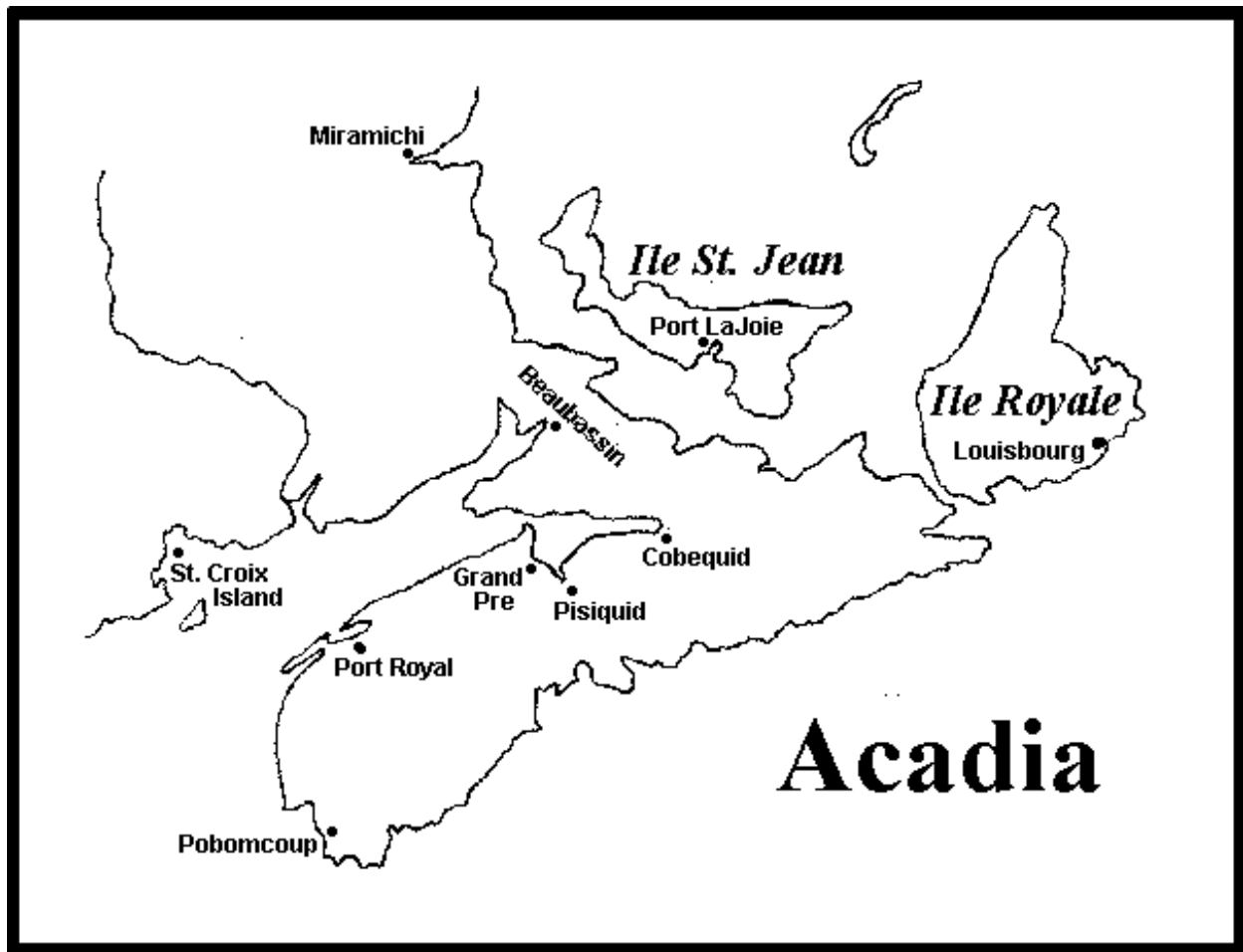
Acadia, what is now Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick, was ceded by the French to the British in 1713 by the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht that ended the War of the Spanish Succession. Its French population was Roman Catholic and judged to be without clear loyalty to the British crown. Given their large numbers and their refusal to take an oath of unconditional allegiance to the British, Governor Charles Lawrence feared they would become allies of the French in any future conflict. While the Acadians asserted their neutrality, there was some reason to suspect that they would take up arms against the British if given the opportunity.

This distrust led to the large deportations of Acadians from Nova Scotia beginning in 1755. These expulsions came to be known as *Le Grand Dérangement*. Whether Lawrence was ordered to expel the Acadians or not, really makes little difference and is not clear, since he was not criticized by his superiors in London and the expulsions continued after his death. This forced removal began with the seizure of several thousands of Acadians who were dispersed to various locations without regard to family ties.

These captives were sent to the various colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia in groups not to exceed a thousand so that “they cannot collect themselves together again” (Faragher, 2005: 336). About half of the Acadian population became part of this Diaspora, while the others fled to neighboring regions in what are now known as the Maritime Provinces of Canada. In fact, Acadian settlements are still found on the west coast of Nova Scotia and on the Maine-New Brunswick border; however, the expulsion process was not easily accomplished. The resistance hero was Joseph Broussard who harassed British troops until he led a group of Acadians to Louisiana in 1764 where he died a year later. Although thousands of French Acadians died in

this mass deportation, the British typically justified the expulsion as “cruel necessity” brought about by the exigencies of the pending French and Indian War.

**Map 1: Acadia and Its Major Settlements at the Time of the Expulsion**



For the French Acadians of Louisiana, the forced removal was an extremely cruel act, causing untold physical and emotional harm. The expulsion has been traditionally regarded as the most signified defining event in Acadian history and marks a historical division of the Acadian people. Over 2,600 to 3,000 of the displaced gradually made their way to Louisiana. In 1713, Spain had acquired Louisiana and in 1783 the Spanish subsidized Acadian emigration to enhance a Catholic population to counter any threat from the newly-independent United States.

The story of the Acadian migration has spurred many tales and myths including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous poem, "Evangeline," written in 1847. Although this mythic story was amended over the years, this epic poem told the story of a couple in love who are separated during the great expulsion and had been separated for many years when she finds him on his death bed in Philadelphia. The opening stanza was once one of the most familiar in American poetry:

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,  
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,  
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,  
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.  
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean  
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.

Once a staple of primary school education, "Evangeline" creates a mythic epic of tragedy and lost love because of the expulsion.

...On the falling tide the freighted vessels departed,  
Bearing a nation, with all its household goods, into exile,  
Exile without an end, and without an example in story.  
Far asunder, on separate coasts, the Acadians landed;  
Scattered were they, like flakes of snow, when the wind from the northeast  
Strikes aslant through the gods that darkened the Banks of Newfoundland.  
Friendless, homeless, hopeless, they wandered from city to city.  
From the cold lakes of the North to sultry, Southern savannas,  
From the bleak shores of the sea to the lands where the Father of Waters  
Seizes the hills in his hands, and drags them into the ocean.

As the poem has it, after a tireless search, Evangeline Bellefontaine eventually finds her Gabriel Lajeunesse on his deathbed in Philadelphia. As filigreed by Louisiana amateur historians, she instead discovers her lost love in St. Martinville. Gabriel, having despaired of ever seeing her again, had married another woman; Evangeline consequently dies of a broken heart.

On the banks of the Teche, are the towns of St. Maur and St. Martin.  
There the long-wandering bride shall be given again to her bridegroom,  
There the long-absent paston regain his flock and his sheepfold.  
Beautiful is the land, with its prairies and forests of fruit trees;  
Under the feet a garden of flowers, and the bluest of heavens  
Bending above, and resting its dome on the walls of the forest.  
They who dwell there have named it the Eden of Louisiana!

“Evangeline” became culturally popularized in Louisiana as it retells the tragic episode of a Louisiana Cajun woman and her heart break and death. It is memorialized by the “Evangeline Oak” and a statue of the heroine in St. Martin de Tours church as well as the Acadian House, a small museum in the center of town where she supposedly lived. According to the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, the house is a symbol of the rebuilding of Cajun culture even if reflecting the architectural style of the next century.

The Acadian House played an important role in the myth, representing the successful rebuilding of Acadian culture in Louisiana while providing a domestic setting in which the rustic image of the Cajun female could be molded into one befitting the American notion of ideal womanhood (Encyclopedia of the Southern Culture, 221).

No longer just a poetic fiction, Evangeline has become a cultural icon and has been integrated into Cajun cultural memory as an evocation of an idealized, bucolic past that counterbalanced the socioeconomic changes brought about by the impact of external forces on the region. “Evangeline” creates a memory that honors the Cajun fight for survival and the recovery of a segment of our society that overcame a tragic event.

The poem also helped elevate the cultural history of the Cajuns by what Carl Brasseaux, the gifted professor and author, has called “folklore” (Brasseaux, 1988: 26). Brasseaux believes that the Cajun myths such as “Evangeline” helped immensely in memorializing the hardships that the Cajun people experienced and in doing so valorized and enhanced their story as a people.



**Fig. 1: Statue and Grave of Evangeline, St. Martin de Tours Church**

The sculpture of Evangeline was donated by the actress Dolores Del Rio, who played the poetic figure in a Hollywood film, and is modeled on her features.

The *Grand Dérangement* poses the interesting issue of whether it was an early example of “ethnic cleansing.” As expressed by a United Nations report in 1994:

“Ethnic Cleansing” is a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent or terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas. To a large extent, it is carried out in the name of misguided nationalism, historic grievances, and a powerful driving sense of revenge. This purpose appears to be the occupation of territory to the exclusion of the purged group or groups (United Nations Commission of Experts Final Report [S/1994/674] May 24, 1994).

Based on this finding, it would appear that the Cajun expulsions would have met the criteria of the U.N. declaration in several ways:

1. The operation as carried out by Anglo-American forces in 1755 included the forced deportation of civilian populations, the cruel and inhumane treatment of prisoners, and the plunder and wanton destruction of communities. These are practices now defined as “crimes against humanity” (Faragher, 2005: 469).
2. The removal was carried out systematically, after long planning, with the explicit approval and use of government agents.

3. The expulsion was intended to eradicate the Acadian community “and destroy their identity as a distinct people” (Faragher, 2005: 336)
4. As is typical of all ethnic cleansing, the process was facilitated by the systematic “dehumanizing” of the population involved. By constructing the Acadian as an ethnic “other,” through the promotion of anti-Catholic and anti-French stereotypes, the subsequent hatred served to deny them legal and moral protection. The definition of a people as “subhuman” creates the “moral ambivalence” that legitimizes the otherwise unacceptable measures necessary for ethnic cleansing.

The fates of the Jews under the National Socialists, the Armenians under the Ottomans, the Bosnians in 1990 at the hands of the Serbs, and the Tutsi in Rwanda are modern-day examples of this genocidal process admittedly on a much larger scale in terms of loss of life. Regardless, the intended fate of the Acadians was similar: removal from their homeland and destruction of their communal identity.

In 2003, the Canadian government of Jean Chretien requested a Royal Proclamation by Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson (Queen Elizabeth II’s Canadian surrogate) that constituted an acknowledgment of responsibility and approximated an official apology:

Whereas on 28 July 1755, the Crown, in the course of administering the affairs of the British Colony of Nova Scotia, made the decision to deport the Acadian people;

Whereas the deportation of the Acadian people, commonly known as le Grand Dérangement, continued until 1763 and had tragic consequences, including the deaths of many thousands of Acadians - from disease, in shipwrecks, in their places of refuge and in prison camps from Nova Scotia and England as well as in the British colonies in America;

Whereas We hope that the Acadian people can turn the page on this dark chapter of their history;



...Now know you that We, by and with the advice of Our Privy Council for Canada, do by this Our Proclamation...designate 28 July of every year as “A Day of Commemoration of the Great Upheaval” (Royal Proclamation, December 10, 2003).

### The Cajuns in Louisiana

There is a great confusion concerning the distinction between “Cajun” and “Creole” and some effort must be made to clarify what is admittedly a contested issue. That being said, the following definitions are offered.

As noted, Creole is originally a reference to the descendants of the French settlers, “to be Creole one needed to be native and French in culture” (Dominguez, 1986: 592-3). In contemporary usage, the designation, again as noted earlier, generally describes the African-American, Caribbean culture of New Orleans and various areas of South Louisiana, although it may also be used by elite families of French descent.

Cajun--is a reference to the rural descendants of Acadian exiles. “Cajun” is (probably) a corruption of Acadian. In contemporary usage, it is now more often than not applied to the inhabitants of the Acadian region who identify with Cajun culture. Such a broad definition, however, is not universally accepted especially by “purists” who would restrict the term to descendants of the originally expelled families. In fact, it may be more accurate to speak of “Cajunness”--a cultural identification, distinct from Cajun--an ethnic identity. In fact, as a result of cultural mixing; the culture of southwest Louisiana has merged different ethnic groups into a newly constructed Cajun identity.

Certain surnames are easily distinguishable as indicating descent from the Acadians who arrived between 1765 and 1785. These include:

Allain, Arceneau/Arceneaux, Aucoin, Babin, Babineau, Babineaux, Bellefontaine, Benoit/Benoît, Bergeron, Bernard, Blanchard, Boudreau/Boudreaux, Bourg/Bourque, Bourgeois, Boutin, Brasseaux/Brasseux, Braud/Breau/Breaux, Broussard, Brun, Bujeau, Dugas/Dugat, Dupuis/Dupuy, Foret/Forêt, Gaudet, Gautreau/Gautreaux, Giroir, Godin,

Granger, Gravois, Guédry/Guidry, Guilbeau, Hebert/Hébert, Jeansonne, La Bauve/LaBauve, Landry, Langlinais, LeBlanc, Leger, LeJeune, Guidry, Martin, Melancon, Mire, Mouton, Naquin, Orillon, Part, Pellerin, Pitre, Poirier, Prejean/Préjean, Richard, Rivet, Robichaud/Robichaux, Rodrigue, Roger, Roy, Savoie/Savoy, Sonnier/Saunier, Thériot, Thibodeau/Thibodeaux, Trahan, and Vincent” (Brasseaux, 1996: Appendix B).

These Acadians intermarried with other ethnic groups and, in the process, a new identity was formed to encompass both the descendants of the Diaspora and their compatriots through intermarriage. “These include French Creole names like Fontenot, François, Picard, or Loileau; Spanish names like Castille, Romero, Mignes/Miguez and Falcon; German names like Folse, Himel/Hymel, Stelly and Schexnaider (and its many variations); as well as Anglo and Scotch-Irish names like McGee, Miller, and Walker” (Brasseaux, 1996: Appendix B).

Cajunness can therefore be considered a fusion identity. As Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee observed, “McGee, that’s a French name. I don’t know anyone name McGee who doesn’t speak French” (Brasseaux, 1996: Appendix B).

Consider the following assessment (in both French and English) by one Cajun concerning what it meant to have this identity:

*...un Cadjin c’est moi. J’suis un Cadjin et j’suis proud de ça. Un Cadjin moi j’trouve c’est une personne qu’a un bon cœur, qu’a du sentiment pour les autres...et aime faire quèqu chose pour quèqu’un d’autre...Le Cadjin c’est close du monde qui vient Nove Scotia, Québec, qu’a tout venu ici pour faire une vie. C’est là où le Cadjin est venu, mais la manière moi j’le vois...un bon cœur, proud, du monde qui travaille dur...*

...a Cajun, that’s me. I’m a Cajun and I’m proud of it. A Cajun, I think, is a person who has a good heart, who has consideration for others...and likes to do something for somebody else...The Cajun is sort of people who came from Nova Scotia, Quebec, who came here to make a life for themselves. That’s where the Cajuns come from, but the way I see it...a good heart, proud people who work hard... [Male respondent, Westwego, 1978]. (Quoted in Trepanier, 1997: 166-67).

Significantly, during the last forty years Louisiana has witnessed the rediscovery of both Cajun awareness and identity. French, the language, was no longer banned from the public

schools as mandated in the state's 1921 Constitution. Now, the language's cultural significance is universally acknowledged (even if it is basically folkloric). Before WWII, the development of the petrochemical industry in the 1950s, the Cajun people were principally dependent on hunting, farming, small ranching, fishing and trapping. The typical Cajun was considered outside mainstream culture and some were judged to be unproductive, lazy story tellers, and nothing more than "French-speaking hillbillies."

As stated in a publication of the WPA's Federal Writers Project:

...Cajuns are a simple, uneducated, uncultured, yet intrinsically genuine and lovable people...The Cajun temperament is impulsive, impetuous, highly flammable, ultra-sensitive, unrelenting in hatred, and ardent in affections...The Cajuns who live on the bayou enjoy a life without stability, responsibility or conventionality...one in which the sole purpose and solitary design is the satisfaction of fundamental necessities and emotions. Education is considered quite superfluous because the sole purpose of the children is to assist in the duties of the farm, marry early, rear a large family, and thus perpetuate the same unchanging cycle of rustic beatitude (Quoted in Freundlich, 1996: 33).

Today, the popularity of Cajun cuisine and music has caused being Cajun to be extremely in vogue, which has lead the people to have a greater sense of pride and joy in their cultural heritage. Ultimately, Cajun identity survived as a notable, unusual but distinct cultural ethno-linguistic exception within a highly uniform American culture. While cultural distinctiveness is visible among Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans, Cajun identity has been distinctly recognized for its staying power over the last two hundred and forty years. This most likely is a result of historic marginalization. Being isolated socially, geographically and by language from the mainstream of American society, the Cajun life developed in a separate world. "Cajunness" has been aided by adding a spatial complement to the cultural. As noted previously, Acadiana may be the clearest cultural region or sub region in the United States.

### Acadiana--The Cajun Homeland

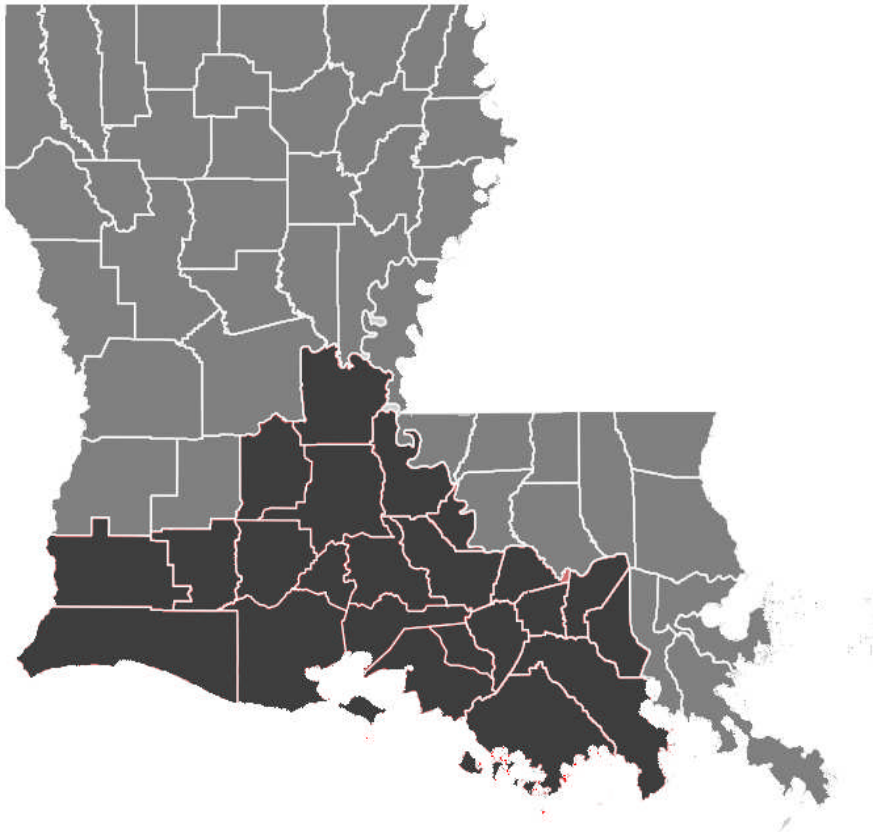
As noted, Cajun culture is limited to a small geographic region and lacks the status of a recognized cultural region. Acadiana nonetheless certainly possesses many of the traits that reflected a cultural region. For example, Acadiana has its own separate identity, which signifies a cultural entity. This reflects Acadiana's long-time aura that is shared by people throughout their region. Also, its culture has maintained a living presence relatively immune from commercialization.

Acadiana is not a political entity with autonomous status, and nor certainly does it seek legal recognition as a separate "state." However, within Acadiana, Cajun culture enjoys provides a unifying sense of identity. Contemporary Cajun culture, however much it may deviate from some notions of historic authenticity, is actively manifested in familial rituals, communal traditions and Cajun aesthetic self-awareness. Cajun culture exhibits the characteristics of a way of life and gives this region a distinctive character.

The official name of this twenty-two parish area is Acadiana as recognized by the Louisiana Legislature. House Concurrent Resolution No. 81 of July 20, 1968 made this designation in recognition of the region's unique heritage. Further recognition of Acadiana was given with the creation of a distinct flag with three silver fleurs-de-lis on a blue field, a gold star on a white field, and a gold tower on a red field. The three silver fleurs-de-lis on the blue field represent the French heritage of Acadiana; the gold star on the white field symbolizes Our Lady of the Assumption, patron saint of the Acadians (in Canada and Louisiana). The star also symbolizes the active participation of the Cajuns in the American Revolution, as soldiers under General Bernardo Gálvez, Spanish governor of Louisiana. The gold tower on the red field represents Spain, the governing power during the Acadian arrival.

As legislatively defined, Acadiana refers to the area that stretches from just west of New Orleans to the Texas border along the Gulf of Mexico coast and up to 100 miles inland to Marksville, largely to the west of the Mississippi River. The region includes the following twenty-two parishes: Acadia, Ascension, Assumption, Avoyelles, Calcasieu, Cameron, Evangeline, Iberia, Iberville, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, Lafourche, Point Coupée, St. Charles, St. James, St. John The Baptist, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, Terrebonne, Vermillion, and West Baton Rouge.

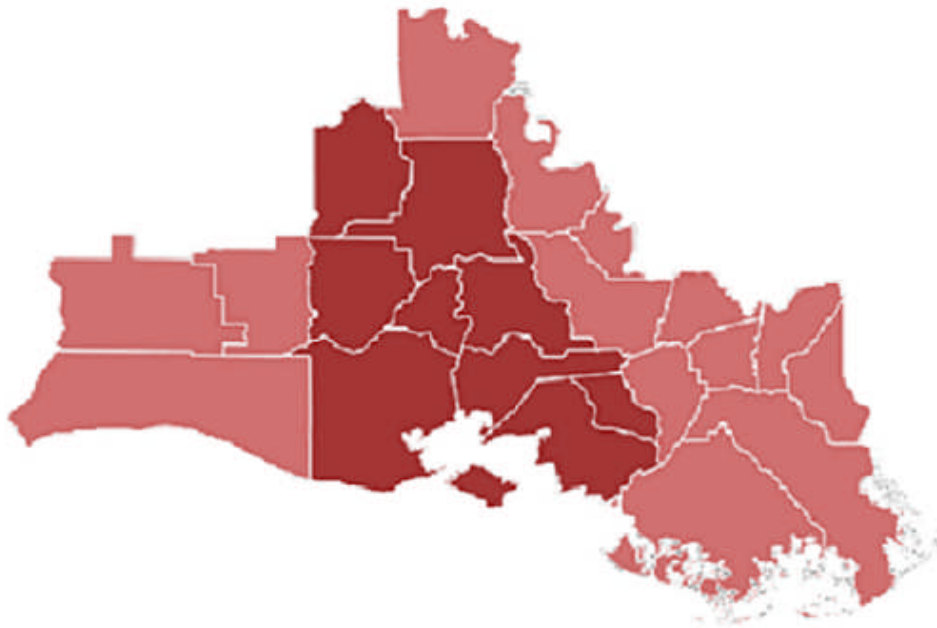
**Map 2: The Twenty-two Parish Acadiana Region**



The total land area is 14,574.105 square miles and its population as of the 2000 census was 1,352,646 residents (about 30% of the state's population). Map 2 shows the twenty-two parish Acadiana region.

Within Acadiana, eight parishes make up the “Cajun Heartland.” This is the central portion of Cajun Country eventually settled by the majority of the relocated Acadians and comprises the following parishes: Acadia, Evangeline, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary and Vermillion. The total land area of the Heartland is 5,619,598 square miles and its census population in 2000 was 601,654 residents. Map 3 shows the eight-parish “Cajun Heartland” or “*le Cœur d’Acadie*.”

**Map 3: The Eight-Parish Cajun Heartland**



One way to visualize this geometrically is that Acadiana is roughly an equilateral triangle that runs from Marksville in the north, to Lake Charles and the Sabine River in the west, the Gulf of Mexico in the south, and the Atchafalaya River in the east. The “Cajun Heartland” approximates a scalene triangle tilted on a southeasterly axis: Opelousas to Crowley, to Morgan City through Abbeville, northward through Franklin to Opelousas. The unquestioned capital of Acadiana is the city of Lafayette and Lafayette parish is at the geographic center of the heartland.

It should be noted that while Acadiana is defined legislatively, the “Cajun Heartland” is an ascriptive term although identified as such by distinctive road signs showing this area’s geographical outline. Table 1 shows the parishes in Acadiana that have the largest percentage of people who self-identify as Cajun. Ten percent of all Louisianans listed themselves as primarily “Cajun,” or about 400,000 total; another 25,000 listed “Cajun” as their secondary ancestry.

**Table 1: Percentage of Cajun Population in 22-Parish Region**

<b>PARISH</b>	<b>% Cajun</b>	<b>PARISH</b>	<b>% Cajun</b>
Acadia	45.53	Lafourche	38.96
Ascension	16.13	Pointe Coupée	14.64
Assumption	32.98	St. Charles	7.92
Avoyelles	21.85	St. James	10.59
Calcasieu	20.27	St John the Baptist	6.29
Cameron	38.68	St. Landry	30.03
Evangeline	38.02	St. Martin	38.04
Iberia	31.54	St. Mary	23.46
Iberville	12.4	Terrebonne	28.78
Jefferson Davis	40.89	Vermilion	45.97
Lafayette	27.2	W. Baton Rouge	15.5

The parish that has the greatest percentage of Cajun population is Vermillion Parish with approximately 50 percent; the next largest percentage Cajun is Acadia Parish (45%). The next two parishes with the largest percentages of Cajuns are: Jefferson Davis (40%), which is not part of the officially-designated Acadiana region, and Lafourche (39%). Cajuns have maintained a

sense of rootedness that is remarkable in the classically fluid nature of American society. It is significant that nearly 700,000 persons nationally who claimed Cajun/Acadian ancestry, 77% resided in Louisiana or Texas (Census, 1990: 1). The largest city in Acadiana is Lafayette whose population is close to 200,000 people. There are several smaller cities such as New Iberia, Opelousas and Thibodeaux. Much of the area is farmland, pasture and swamp; the Atchafalaya Basin is the largest wetlands area in the United States.

Coda: Cajun/Cajunness: Ethnicity or Identity

The question of what is Cajun, and what constitutes Cajun culture, is a highly contested subject. One argument is that Cajun is an ethnic designation that is the exclusive property of descendants from *le Grand Dérangement*. However, some historians believe that genealogical results fail to support this view given the degree of out-marriage. Obviously, a determination of who is authentically Cajun can be subject to absurd definitional complexity.

Moreover, consider the anecdotal evidence as related by Cajun musician, Dennis McGee, quoted earlier, who stated that he was a Cajun because he did not know any McGees who did not speak French. Most striking is a comparison of the 1990 and 2000 census with regard to the Acadiana region. The 1990 was the first, and only, census to provide a choice of “Cajun” as an ethnic category and over 400,000 in the region so identified. When the 2000 census used the term “French-Canadian,” the response dropped to about 44,000. It would appear that there is an overwhelming sense that Cajun as a broad, self-described cultural self-definition compared to the narrow argument of genealogical descent. Moreover, it would appear that a sense of Cajunness trumps being of French-Canadian heritage even among those who might be legitimate descendants of Diaspora settlers.



What this suggests is that the question of who is, or is not, a descendent of the exiled Acadians is not the important demarcation. Being Cajun is a fluid category; something that is felt and which defines a certain outlook on one's way of life. In some sense, being Cajun is not just acting Cajun; but entails sharing the broad value-system of Cajun customs constitutes the reality. The ethnic definition of Cajun may be French-Canadian, but the cultural sensibility is "Cajunness." Residents of the region with no blood ties to the Acadian heritage "have nonetheless become Cajun--that is, they have been assimilated into the Cajun population thanks in large part to the Cajun renaissance that developed onward from the mid 1960s" (Stivale, 2003: 25). In fact, non-Cajun people of the area regard themselves as Cajun since they consider themselves to be a part of the dominant culture.

The search for an "authentic Cajun identity" is virtually impossible regardless of many felt desires to validate this claim. As noted, there is a "hybridism" among the inhabitants of the Acadiana region as the Acadian exiles intermixed with various ethnic groups resulting in a diverse population to which the Cajun designation is generally applied (Brasseaux, 1992: 38-39). Accordingly, the aspects of the Cajun culture as a way of life are the subject of the next section.

In anticipating the future matter, what will need to be considered is the degree to which the Cajun identity construction is paralleled by a constructed culture. However, it should be noted that the concept of authenticity for constructing identity is a highly contested and volatile issue. Much of what purports to be the manifestation of heritage is often the consequence of symbolic appropriation of cultural elements to create an identity.

## CHAPTER 3 CAJUN FOLK HERITAGE: SELF-EXPRESSION AND IDENTITY

### Cajun Festivals

Acadiana is the festival capital of America. These occur most often in spring, summer and fall; organized festivities began in 1936 and the number escalated in the 1960s and 1970s. The festivals provide a means of celebrating what is believed to be a shared identity. “At a time when there were few other means for Cajuns to affirm their culture and identity, the festivals provide a way to do so” (Esman, 1982: 199). As public events, festivals are opportunities for community entertainment, for confirmation of their social values, and togetherness. Since Cajuns have increasingly shown a desire to focus on “who they are.” Festivals fill this void. Organized by local entities and drawing a large number of people from the surrounding areas, they are seen as extensions of communal customs. With the family as the fundamental unit of Cajun identity and social structure, the festival is an extended family event to “*laissez les bons temps rouler*” (“let the good times roll”).

Table 2 lists the major festivals in Acadiana. Many of them were associated with agricultural and food products since the early economy was essentially based on farming and fishing. It also represents the popular perception of what Cajuns do best: cook good food. The oldest festival is the Rice Festival in Acadia Parish, “The Rice Capital of the United States.” The second oldest, in Morgan City, became the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival thirty years after its creation in 1938 to reflect the transformed local economy. Arguably the most famous and popular, the Crawfish Festival in Breaux Bridge honors what many regard as a symbol of Cajun identity. Overall, there are over a hundred such organized events in Acadiana.

The Cajun festivals follow a formalized ritual. Typically, the day or weekend begins with a religious observance such as a Catholic mass or a specialized solemnity such as the “Blessing of the Fleet” at the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival. (In the aftermath of the BP disaster, the

festival's name has a harsh irony.) Many of these festivals were created by the Catholic Church and reflect the special bond between the Church and the Cajun community. A parade often follows, led by a local woman as queen, with bands and floats carrying local dignitaries. (Many festivals are organized by chambers of commerce or other civic associations.) Other activities might include cooking competitions, livestock shows, arts and crafts exhibits, as well as carnival attractions. Of course, eating, drinking and dancing to Cajun music become progressively pervasive as the day wears on. A festival may last for a day or over a weekend.



**Figure 2: Shrimp and Petroleum Festival Poster**



**Figure 3: Miss Cajun Hot Sauce Queen**

**Table 2: Major Festivals in Acadiana**

<b>Festival Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
Cajun Hot Sauce Festival	New Iberia
Cochon de Lait Festival	Mansura
Crawfish Festival	Breaux Bridge
Duck Festival	Gueydan
Frog Festival	Rayne
Fur and Wildlife Festival	Cameron
Louisiana Cattle Festival	Abbeville
Louisiana Cotton Festival	Ville Platte
Louisiana Gumbo Festival	Thibodaux
Louisiana Yambilee (Sweet Potato Festival)	Opelousas
Giant Omelette Celebration	Abbeville
Rabbit Festival	Iowa
Rice Festival	Crowley
Shrimp Festival	Delcambre
Shrimp and Petroleum Festival	Morgan City
Sugarcane Festival	New Iberia

The major purpose of a festival is community celebration as a symbol of local pride and with the Cajuns to “pass a good time”. The underlying reason is open and public expression of Cajun identity. “Group awareness has increased since the 1960s as have the number of festivals” (Esman, 1982: 201). They express an identity and reflect a distinction between the natives and

visitors. On the other hand, these boundaries are flexible and express what are often vaguely authentic Cajun customs.

LSU anthropologist Margaret Esman states in her writings that Cajuns have emphasized a “fun culture” in order to “pass a good time,” which is an important Cajun goal. Parties, celebrations and dances are a universal feature of Cajun life. Cajuns explain that “*les bons temps*,” or the good times, are what are important in life (Esman, 1982: 201). Some of these traits can verge on the stereotypical. Furthermore, a Cajun is culturally separate from other Americans. Certainly, cultural manifestations are more complex and variegated than going to festivals. Nonetheless, festivals do represent a heightened sense of Cajunness and communal identity.

### Cajun Mardi Gras

Although Mardi Gras is commonly associated with New Orleans, a number of Cajun communities sponsor their own celebrations. *La Carnivale du Mardi Gras* begins on Twelfth Night (the feast of the Epiphany) and lasts through Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras), the day before Ash Wednesday. This marks the beginning of the penitential season of Lent, which is the forty days (excluding Sundays) before Easter. Mardi Gras is a moveable feast and can be as early as February 3 and as late as March 9. The Carnival season is a period of revelry that culminates on Mardi Gras day. For New Orleans, Mardi Gras’s economic impact is significant in drawing upwards of a million visitors, at least pre-Katrina. The need to present an entertainment spectacle has led to a progressive commercialization and commodification of the traditional customs associated with the Carnival’s festivities.





**Figure 4: Cajun Mardi Gras**



**Figure 5: Cajun Mardi Gras**

The Cajun Mardi Gras celebrations have a distinctly local feel and the celebrants participate in ways that are linked with traditional customs. Of course, folk culture may have no reliable information on their past and whether it is authentic is always questionable. The town of Mamou in Evangeline Parish has a Mardi Gras celebration run by local Cajuns and is believed to date to the 1800s. The website of the Mamou-Iota Mardi Gras asserts, “Nowhere in the world can one see such a well-preserved tradition by a small group of Cajuns who are determined to relive a part of their heritage...” Similarly, Eunice proclaims that its “Mardi Gras draws on traditions which are centuries old.” As evidence, some authors and critics question the authenticity of these events and believe that the fabric of Cajun folklore should be more thoroughly scrutinized.

It has been proved that the *Courir de Mardi Gras* (which involves bands of costumed, mounted riders) were a feature of the traditional rural Mardi Gras celebration. Moreover, the Carnival suppers and dances that were a feature of rural Cajun Mardi Gras celebrations experienced a sharp revival in the 1960s (Ancelet and Edmonds, 1996: 27). The ritual of the *courir* is fairly well-established even if accompanied by a high degree of improvisation. The participants ride horses from house to house asking for the ingredients of a gumbo. After the leader of the *courir* receives the owner’s permission, the masked riders (men and teenage boys for whom it is something of a rite of passage), charge the house where they will sing, dance and frolic while begging for *cinq sous* (five cents).

*C’est le Mardi Gras, c’est tout de bons jeunes gens,  
Des bons jeunes gens, ça devient de toutes des bonnes familles...  
C’est pas des malfaiteurs, c’est juste des quémandeurs.*

The Mardi Gras, they are all good people,  
Good people who all come from good families...  
They are not evil-doers, they are just beggars. (Putnam and Ancelet, 1996)



When the troupe has fulfilled this ritual of supplication to the farmer's satisfaction, he presents a chicken to the *capitaine* who throws the live fowl into the air for the men and boys to pursue. The website of the Eunice *Courir de Mardi Gras* observes that the group will give chase, running, falling and fumbling over each other for the honor of being the one to catch their dinner. The group member who catches the chicken is hailed as the victor and the entire troupe celebrates with various acts of play, such as climbing trees, taunting the farmer to guess their identities, making the farmer's wife dance with them, or running off with the children, until called back to order by the *capitaine*.

This pattern of action is repeated at various farmhouses until the Mardi Gras has circled the town, at which time the *capitaine* leads the group back to its center. The whole town then shares a gumbo cooked from captured chickens and ends the evening with a *bal masqué*. Next morning is Ash Wednesday, a Day of Atonement and the beginning of Lent. As more than one reader has told me, "If you do Mardi Gras right, you'll have enough to pray about when you get up early and go to church" (Lindahl, 1986: 129-30).

Their display of raucous behavior can appear to others as "only a slightly less licentious cousin of the most lurid enactments of the more familiar New Orleans Mardi Gras" (Lindahl, 1986: 128). "Their breath, voices, and lurching motions feed suspicions--sometimes founded--that they had been drinking for days" (Lindahl, 1986: 127). Outside observers of Cajun Mardi Gras have emphasized the public drunkenness, but another interpretation suggests that it is "mindless drunkenness with a history," that is, "a history that makes festive action anything but mindless" (Lindahl, 1986: 128). As noted earlier, the propensity to "have a good time" through drinking, eating well, and dancing is the most important marker of the Cajun way of life. However, it is certainly inaccurate to stereotype the Cajuns as hedonistic. The most balanced view suggests that the antics and misbehavior of the rural Mardi Gras run, while often directly related to inebriation, should be seen in a broader context.

However, such drunkenness is a form of ritualized inebriation that develops through drinking, the sense of freedom afforded by participants' anonymity, and their assuming

expected roles associated with Mardi Gras. Violence and misconduct are largely attributable to overzealous play, loss of temper, personal conflicts, and spectators' negative reactions to Mardi Gras antics. Although seemingly chaotic, Mardi Gras follows an idealized script and it has mechanisms of control which mediate between acceptable drinking behavior and play and actual intoxication and misbehavior. (Sexton, 2001: 28)

### Cajun Music

Along with the cuisine, Cajun music has been a vibrant cultural commercial industry. Cajun music has its roots in the traditions from the French-speaking Acadians. Much of the distinctive Cajun musical expression has been associated with the communal events in rural dance halls known as the *fais do-do*. As occasions for entertainment and opportunities for socializing and courtship, the *fais do-do* was a Saturday evening magnet for people from the far reaches of the local countryside regardless of age. Today, the *fais do-do* in Acadiana is more likely to be part of a local festival and take place in parks and civic spaces. However, traditional dance halls can still be found. A more commercialized version of the *fais-do-do* can be found in tourist-oriented restaurants that feature live Cajun music such as Randol's in Lafayette and Mulate's in Breaux Bridge.



**Figure 6: Rainbow Inn Dance Hall**

The Cajun dance was a big part of the entertainment, as Barry Jean Ancelet points out in his study of Cajun music, “Descriptions of the Acadians at the time of the dispersion invariably mention their insatiable love of dancing. In a letter to his intendent dated March 12, 1764, Saltoris described a communal wedding and baptism blessing ceremony among the Acadian exiles in Saint-Domingue: ‘They did not eat until everyone had given his toast. They danced, the old and the young alike, all dancing to a fast step’” (Ancelet, 1994: 287).

The unaccompanied ballad was the oldest form of Cajun music with a strong emphasis on themes of death, loneliness, and unrequited love. The classic instruments are the fiddle and the accordion although the acoustic guitar is not uncommon. The lyrics were originally in old Cajun French and this tradition still persists (despite the increasing use of English by younger singers) even if it is sung phonetically. Given the overall decline in French language usage, it may be the case that: “*La langue vive dans la chanson*,” “The language lives in the music.” Ancelet states, “When instruments were unavailable or at special times, such as Lent, when instrumental music was forbidden, the Acadians managed to dance anyway, producing music with their voices, clapping their hands, and stamping their feet for percussion. If the repertoire of round dances became stale, they simply used their voices as instruments to produce dance tunes called *des réels à bouche*” (use of one’s mouth for music tones) (Ancelet, 1999: 15).

As a result of the intrusion of popular culture since the 1920s, Cajuns experienced increasing “Americanization,” which affected their music traditions. Just as Cajun music was thought to be on the verge of extinction, a performance by Dewey Balfa, Gladius Thibodeaux and Vinus LeJeune at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival was greeted with critical acclaim. In turn, this prompted a revival of interest in traditional Cajun music that was supported by the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). A significant milestone was reached in 1974 with the Tribute to Cajun Music Festival (now part of *Festivals Acadiens*) in Lafayette. The

Cajun French Music Association (CFMA) exists to preserve traditional Cajun music. The vexing questions of authenticity can be seen in contrasting three prominent contemporary Cajun musicians: Marc Savoy, Zachary Richard and Michael Doucet.



**Figure 7: Cajun Zydeco Band**

Savoy (born in 1940) abandoned his touring career in the 1960s arousing disgust with the commodification of Cajun music. He subsequently opened a music store specializing in building the diatonic accordions used in playing Cajun music. “In his decision to quit touring and start a business, he made a fervent statement about his conception of the local and the authentic as well as about his belief in using quality instruments as part of the Cajun musical heritage” (Stivale, 2003: 27).

Richard (born in 1950) has projected his music, as well as poetry and politics, into the international sphere “in order to create an authenticity, a Cajun ‘essence’ expressed as a highly politicized cultural invention” (Stivale, 2003: 28). Early in his career, Richard joined the 1970s Quebec separatist movement as well as espousing French separatism in Louisiana, “which he attributed to a feverish militancy regarding his Acadian heritage” (Ancelet, 1999: 95-97).

Richard was a founding member of the organization *Action Cadienne*, which sought to preserve the Cajun French dialect. For his cultural activism, Richard received the *Ordre des Arts et Lettres* from the French *Ministre de la Francophonie*.

Michael Doucet (born 1951) is a celebrated fiddler who explored his Cajun heritage within Louisiana as a frequent participant in educational initiatives on Cajun folklore and music. He formed the emblematic Cajun band “BeauSoleil,” which included several members of his earlier group, “Coteau,” of which Zachary Richard was a member; Doucet “has skillfully melded the global and the local by means of the outreach of the commercial (quite successful) practice with the local practice of educating the public on folk culture” (Stivale, 2003: 28).

Each of these musical figures has addressed the question of what constitutes an authentic Cajun musical tradition and, by extension, the authenticity of Cajun identity. As has been noted before, what constitutes the “authentic” is a highly volatile issue. However, this volatility may be a consequence of the Cajun “cultural renaissance” that has been celebrated over the past half-century. As a valorization of what had been denigrated, the Cajun renaissance represents a redefinition of identity through a positive identification with group values and heritage. On the other hand, any effort to determine “what is cultural purity” is not only inherently problematic, but highly questionable. Is Cajun music, for example, to be judged authentic only if it is expressed in a nineteenth century style (assuming that this could be determined given the evanescent nature of folkloric traditions)? Is the Cajun way of life supposed to be solely its past--a kind of living theme park?

The effort to revitalize traditional Cajun music can be termed a cultural renaissance. The significance of such a renaissance is not a claim to have rediscovered the authentic, but that the expressive culture as defined by Cajuns themselves and not imposed by others. Contemporary Cajun culture cannot be evaluated without acknowledging the role of a conscious construction of

identity. With reference to the musical genre discussed here, authenticity may be best understood if compared to a jazz musician's repertory. "The individual pieces come out of a tradition, but improvisation always occurs....Just as a jazz artist's music depends on engaging an audience and fellow musicians, so does a culture come into existence because a 'we' and a 'they' interact" (Jackson, 1995: 18). In sum, the significance of the Cajun cultural renaissance should not be exclusively judged for its reclamation of what can admittedly only be vaguely recollected as authentic. Rather, it is the reclamation of cultural self-definition by the Cajuns themselves and the use of a musical tradition as a symbol of communal pride.

### Cajun Cuisine

First of all, Cajun cuisine as we know it today is not what it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Regardless, if the French language constitutes the *mentalité* of Cajun life, and if music is its heart, food must be its soul. More than music, present day Cajun cuisine is what for many people – both within and outside the Acadian region – defines Cajun culture. Like the music, the cuisine is a heritage which for many years was without formality or fixed formula. As indicative of the diversity of Cajun ethnicity, its cuisine includes influences that are American Indian, French, Spanish, Afro-Caribbean and German. Indeed, Cajun cuisine has a clear claim to being the finest and most definitive regional cooking in America.

*"There's a lot of good eatin' in this country, but not this good."* This advertisement of the Louisiana Office of Tourism testifies to the excellence of Louisianan food. It "reflects the national belief that there is something special about the state's culinary heritage, and the native belief that the local food is something to brag about, something to present to the public as part of the region's identity" (Gutierrez, 1985: 151). Food can be reflective of deep social and aesthetic systems. The term is "foodways," which includes the "production, distribution, preparation,

presentation, serving and eating of food, refers to its social, symbolic psychological and behavioral aspects as well” (Gutierrez, 1985: 151).

Of course, Creole cuisine must be distinguished from Cajun cuisine. The Creole cuisine is urban, mostly New Orleanian, and based on classic sauce-making as seen by the status of a *saucier* in a Creole kitchen. Cajun cuisine, while sharing with the Creole reliance on aromatic spices, is rural and derived from an economy of necessity. In a sense, it developed as a “living off the land cuisine” with rice-based dishes that make use of local ingredients such as crawfish, shrimp and the “holy trinity” of Cajun vegetables: onions, celery, and green pepper.

The culinary glue of many Cajun preparations is a *roux*, which is a brown-colored (light brown or dark brown, depending on the area) creation of oil and flour cooked and stirred on medium-high heat. *Roux* is the formula for such classic Cajun dishes like gumbo, *sauce piquante* and *écrevisse étouffée*.

- (1) Gumbo is from the African word *guingumbo* meaning okra as this vegetable was, and still is, traditional in a one-pot meal. This dish--a cross between a stew and soup--consists of rice and various other ingredients such as: *fruits de mer* or meats such as chicken, duck, venison or *andouille* sausage;
- (2) *Écrevisse étouffée* is also a *roux* and rice-based preparation; this smothered dish is particularly memorable for its use of the crawfish or “mud bug” that has become the state’s unofficial emblem;
- (3) *Sauce Piquante* is a sauce made with the aforementioned Cajun culinary trinity: onions, peppers, and celery along with the highly-spiced jalapeno peppers and tomatoes. It is a preparation used with fish, fowl, beef, and seafood.



- (4) Another classic of Cajun cuisine is *boudin*, a legendary sausage that is widely sold in convenience stores for on-site consumption. It consists of seasoned pork, rice, and vegetables stuffed in a sausage skin.



**Figure 8: Jambalaya**



**Figure 9: Cajun Chicken Gumbo**

Common cooking condiments are: Tabasco sauce (pepper, vinegar, and salt), most famously from McIlhenny's on Avery Island; Tony Chachere's, a seasoning of salt, red pepper,



other spices and garlic from Opelousas; “dirty rice,” a rice dressing mixed with vegetables and rice. There are other Cajun specialties such as the aforementioned *andouille* (a spicy, stuffed pork sausage), *chourice* (stuffed stomach) and *tasso* (a highly smoked pork). Two traditional celebrations of Cajun cuisine are the: *boucherie* and *cochon de lait*. The former is a slaughtering of cattle; the latter involves swine. Both are often community events or for extended families and friends. Without a question, the most frequent Cajun group-cooking is the crawfish boil.

Two celebrated Cajun chefs are Paul Prudhomme, most famous for his French Quarter restaurant’s popularization of “blackened” redfish, which is not a traditional Cajun preparation, and John Folse, a culinary entrepreneur and owner of Lafitte’s Landing restaurant (recently destroyed by a fire) in Donaldsonville. Interestingly, Emeril Lagasse, the noted television celebrity and proprietor of a famous New Orleans restaurant, is neither Cajun nor Creole. Much of what passes for Cajun (for example, Cajun pizza) is false, and the craze for redfish led to its being placed on the endangered species list.

Cajun cuisine may be the greatest culinary celebration of the bayous and bays of Acadiana. Kay Walter Mobile observed: “Food done here in the Louisiana bayou country comes close to being a state religion--as much ceremony as sustenance...a special occasion” (Folse, 2004: 375). Others, including this author, consider it to be a contentious statement. While the importance of Cajun “foodways” cannot (and should not) be minimized, the essence of “culinary Cajunness” cannot be found in a recipe book or restaurant menu. It is a traditional form of cooking passed on by inter-generational teaching in the family kitchen or hunting camp.

#### Cajun Folk Craft and Folk Art

Most Cajun communities in Southwest Louisiana have produced utilitarian objects for practical use: pottery for cooking, baskets to carry items, quilts for warmth when sleeping.

“These everyday objects become art when they are produced not just for utility, but to the best of

each individual's sense of beauty in order to enrich his or her life" (Medford, 2008: 1). The object, accordingly, becomes somewhat "aestheticized" even as it retains its practical value. Furthermore, objects made for use in everyday life may become so aestheticized that they constitute an art form. Folk crafts--such as the pottery, baskets, and quilts mentioned above--are often displayed in fine arts museums as well as heritage sites. This transformation of craft into art is similar to the way in which objects created for ecclesiastical use become valued for their formal properties, as distinct from their religious meaning. The necessary condition for the transformation of craft objects into artwork is, of course, the presence of highly sophisticated workmanship. The following distinction can be suggested: while folk crafts may be somewhat aesthetic, it is their utility which is important; "when the aesthetic element predominates, we have folk arts" (Jordan, 1985:133).

The downside of technological advances is that the production of machine-made goods make handcrafted utensils unnecessary. Consequently, traditional folk crafts are difficult to revive or resurrect as interruptions over the passage of time dull the memory of how it was done previously. When a folk craft tradition is badly diminished or vanishes, its revival may depend on the reinvention of the past in accord with the values of the present. The remembered tradition may result in a simulacrum, that is, a well-intentioned imitation. On the other hand, folk traditions are not necessarily static, but evolve stylistically and technically. The determination of authenticity is, as has been noted and will be further elaborated, a highly contentious issue. Arguably, what is important is not fidelity to stylistic and technical tradition of doubtful provenance, but the significance that the folk culture has in "how people identify themselves and how other people see them" (Jordan, 1985: 51).

The Cajun cultural rebirth is more than a story-book revivalism. Regardless, romantic mythology has not been absent. Many of the ideas about the Cajun region and its customs are

characterized by an often questionable nostalgia that nonetheless represents a sense of pride in a unique identity. In sum, selective cultural traits become symbols of identity, regardless of doubtful provenance.

Language, food, music and religion are examples of cultural features which, because of their symbolic associations, often provide individuals within ethnic groups a means of expressing ethnic identity and of demonstrating their commonality with other members of the group (Jordan, 1985: 51).

It is especially important that the cultural forms that largely define identity are the folkloric: tales, songs, crafts, foodways, holiday rituals and other traditions. On the other hand, this identification is rendered more problematic because people usually maintain multiple identities: Cajun, Louisianan, Southern, American. As noted, the line between “craft” and “art” can also be highly contentious. Although both crafts and art share the necessity of demonstrating skills in presenting or performing that is acquired by study, practice and observation, art may be typically distinguished by more heightened consciousness of aestheticism. The vernacular architecture and the paintings of contemporary artist, George Rodrigue, are among the best representatives of Cajun folk art and are discussed in the next section.

The early Acadian refugees from Nova Scotia and other parts of the Diaspora originally constructed buildings on ground level with walls that were planks or posts embedded vertically in the ground, finished with *bousillage* insulation and earthen floors. However, Louisiana’s high water table and Gulf Coast termites caused the posts to rot and deteriorate, making the walls structurally unsound. Frequent inundations from floodwaters made houses built flush with the ground particularly vulnerable. In addition, the traditional Acadian house, with its insulated walls and thick thatch roof, designed to shield against the frigid climate of Canada, proved unbearably hot in Louisiana’s sweltering summer months.

Traditional Acadian styles were altered to suit the semi-tropical climate, humidity and swamps of Louisiana. The ground floor was supported on cypress blocks for better

ventilation and a front gallery added for covered storage and outdoor seating. Local Spanish moss mixed with mud provided material for plaster infill (*bousillage*) of interior walls. Cajuns retained the Acadian *garconniere* or loft with outside staircase where the boys slept. The *pieux* fence around the house was constructed from cypress posts, but otherwise machine-sawn timber predominated (Lewis, 1996: 70).

The resulting look was hardly Acadian, but distinctly Cajun, with the fusion of traditional Canadian maritime, Creole and Caribbean elements. The result was a distinctive vernacular architecture that is found throughout southeastern Louisiana in modern, as well as traditional, architecture. “New Acadian” houses, which purport to simulate the traditional style, may have added fake front galleries and side stairways; however the look is still identifiably that of Cajun regional architecture. In many ways, these architectural elements have become the most visible physical manifestation of what is regarded as the Cajun style. (Figures 10-13 show some representative examples of Cajun vernacular architecture).

### **CAJUN VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE**



**Figure 10: Early Creole House**

This Creole House is a recreation of a type of house built by early Acadians in the eighteenth century and its stylistic elements are still in evidence throughout south Louisiana. This house shows both French and Caribbean influences. The continuous pitch gabled roof covers both the main roof and a small kitchen in the back of the house. This is built of half-timber framing, filled with *bousillage*. The outside stairway led to a second floor where part of the family slept. This structure is at Vermillionville Folk Life and Heritage Park in Lafayette.



**Figure 11: Acadian House**

“Acadian House” was built in about 1765 by Chevalier M. D’Auterive on property he received from a Spanish land grant. It is near St. Martinville. It has the classic characteristics of Cajun architecture being built on brick piers with a pitched roof, second-story gallery, louvered shutters and double casement windows. These architectural elements are designed to maximize the circulation of air throughout the building.



**Figure 12: Parlange Plantation House**

“Parlange,” a classic example of a substantial French plantation house in Pointe Coupée parish (C. 1750), is built of brick on the first level and cypress, plaster and mud on the second. Brick pillars support the balconies surrounding the house and matching cypress colonettes support the hipped roof. An attached, but physically distinct *garçonnerie* is at the back. The house is still occupied by the Parlange family.



**Figure 13: E. D. White House**

This house was built by Edward Douglas White, one of the earliest settlers in Lafourche Parish, in 1890. He became governor of Louisiana and was later a U.S. Congressman as well as a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court (Louisiana's sole representative on the high court). This house is an example of what is termed a "raised cottage" with a brick base, front and back galleries, and pitched roof with dormers.

Without question, the most famous contemporary Cajun artist is George Rodrigue (1944 - ). Indeed, his "Blue Dog" paintings are as iconic of Cajun identity as are the food and music. A native of New Iberia, Rodrigue first attended what was then the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now University of Louisiana - Lafayette), followed by the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. On returning to Louisiana, Rodrigue experienced a marked development in his personal and professional life. "I realized that no one was painting Louisiana seriously" (Quoted in Freundlich, 1996: 27). Having a deep reverence for the culture into which he was born and raised, he began to paint the landscape of Acadiana in 1967 using the indigenous and distinctive live oaks as the central motif. Those "dark and brooding compositions" depicting tree, sky and ground were "imaginative reinventions of the late nineteenth-century Louisiana landscape tradition (New Orleans Museum of Art, 2008: 2). For Rodrigue, the pre-World War I period was the last time that Cajun life was free of outside

influences. The live oak was an icon that symbolized a lost way of life: “The tree represented the first shelter for the Cajun. This huge monster with their houses in its shadow. They lived around it, they gathered its moss. It was central to their condition” (Rodrigue quoted in Freundlich, 1996: 27). (Figures 5-18 show representations of Rodrigue’s different aesthetic genres).

In 1971, Rodrigue undertook a series of scenes of Cajun life that referenced family photographs from the early twentieth century. The subjects of his Cajun paintings represent a wide variety of group activities – “all placed outside silhouetted against the ever-present live oak tree” (New Orleans Museum of Art, 2008: 2). These multifigure compositions visualize the unique Cajun culture that evolved over two hundred years in the isolated bayous and marshes of southwest Louisiana. In 1981, Rodrigue painted a series of portraits of famous Louisianans such as Huey Long, Earl Long and Edwin Edwards, as well as President Reagan on horseback. Important figures in the literary, musical and culinary arts of Louisiana were also depicted, such as Walker Percy, Louis Armstrong and Paul Prudhomme.

Without question, it was his “Blue Dog” series beginning in 1984 that elevated Rodrigue beyond regional to national and international fame. The first Blue Dog was one of a series of paintings commissioned to illustrate a book of Cajun folk tales by Chris Segura. For a story about *Loup Garou*, the Cajun werewolf, Rodrigue used the image of his deceased dog, Tiffany. Much has been written speculating about the metaphysical import of the Blue Dog and its haunting image (especially its eyes) that has stayed the same in over a hundred paintings in a wide variety of settings.

The multitudinous devotees of Blue Dog know that after Rodrigue’s black-and-white terrier-spaniel Tiffany, his beloved companion of ten years, died, Rodrigue began to be haunted by thoughts that she could not find peace – that she was wandering the universe searching for her master so that she could find peace (Freundlich, 1996: 21).



The dog's image evokes "feelings of humor, love, confusion, irony, sadness, even desire...The Blue Dog has become an Everyman or Everyday, who in its naiveté and innocence triumphs over adversity" (New Orleans Museum of Art, 2008: 3). All of this can be disputed or dismissed. Regardless, the "Blue Dog" has achieved iconic status--even being represented in an Absolut Vodka marketing campaign. Rodrigue's "Blue Dog" has become an internationally-recognized Cajun symbol in the same category as a plate of crawfish, a bottle of Tabasco sauce, a live oak tree or a ballad sung in the local *patois*.

**SELECTED EXAMPLES OF THE ART OF GEORGE RODRIGUE:** Live Oaks (Figures 14-15), Folkloric Studies (Figures 16-17), Cajun Portraits (Figure 18), Political Portraits (Figures 19-22), "Blue Dog" (Figures 23-26).



**Figure 14:** *Sugar Bridge Over Coulee*, 1973





**Figure 15:** *Broken Limb*, 1975



**Figure 16:** *Aioli Dinner*, 1971



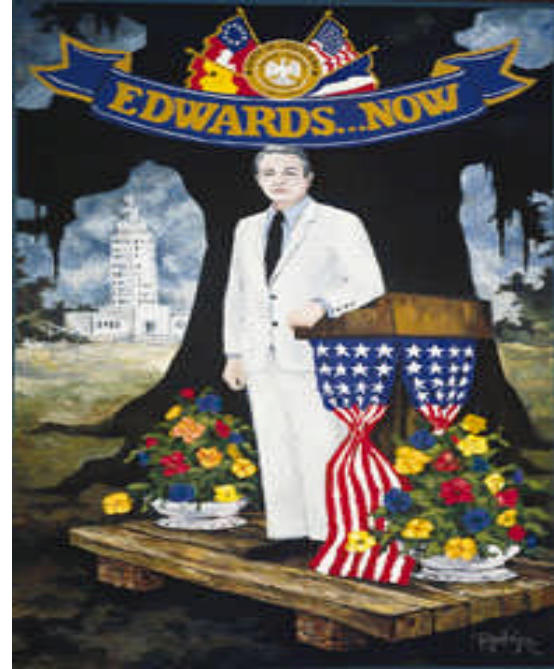
**Figure 17:** *Louisiana Hayride*, 1972



**Figure 18:** *A Walk with Jolie*, 1988



**Figure 19: Portrait of Huey Long**



**Figure 20: Portrait of Edwin Edwards**



**Figure 21: Portrait of Ronald Reagan**



**Figure 22: Portrait of Earl Long**





Figure 23: *Portrait of a Blue Dog I*



Figure 24: *Portrait of a Blue Dog II*

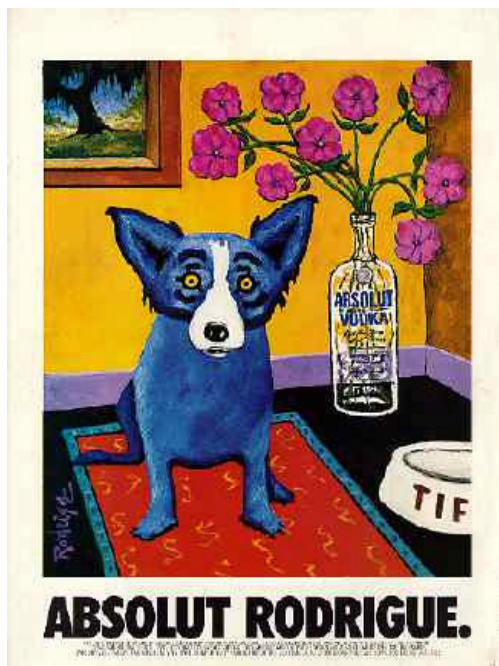


Figure 25: *Portrait of a Blue Dog III*



Figure 26: *Portrait of Blue Dog IV*

### Coda: Imagined Customs

In sum, Cajun identity does involve a sense of normalcy that generates an image of ritualized cultural norms that “promotes an imagined Cajun-French community and which integrates or brings together a diverse population” (Sexton, 1999: 297). This reflects a common need in many non-typical marginalized societies to revive, revitalize and reassert a traditional culture whose characteristics are deemed necessary for promoting group solidarity. Such efforts have been described as an “objectifying logic” in which objects acquire symbolic value after being claimed by a group as an element of its identity (Handler, 1988: 155). However, claims to the “possession” of cultural properties as representative and constructive of cultural identity can be highly problematic (Handler, 1988: 154).

Cultural revival often entails the reinvention of culture rather than the preservation of a clearly recognized, continuous cultural tradition. “A corollary to this process is the invention of primary ownership of the traditions being revived or preserved in a new context; hence symbolic appropriation” (Sexton, 1999: 303). Cajun Mardi Gras reflects this process as an activity with complex origins that is redefined into a symbolic element of Cajun culture by scholars and popular culture media alike.

This Cajunization of Mardi Gras involved the two related processes of cultural objectification and symbolic appropriation in which cultural elements are reified into things that a group can lay claim to...and which are recognized by external viewers even as the claims of others to a share in this cultural property were excluded” (Sexton, 1999: 310-11).

The reclamation of cultural property was an important characteristic of the ethnic revivalism of the 1960s. It emphasized and embodied folkloric customs and historical legitimization. Pride in shared identity and common customs was the goal of revivalist leaders who sought to eradicate the stigma of Cajun and “coonass” as a signifier of “white trash” and rural buffoonery.

In accomplishing this goal, Cajun social and educational “high brows” may have appropriated cultural symbols that were not unique to the group. To a certain degree, these are invented customs embraced with well-meaning intentions and adapted as felt necessary for modern consumption. Yet, none of this denies the uniqueness of Cajun culture nor is the “invention of traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2003) just a phenomenon of Acadiana. Most important, Cajunness as a cultural identifier became highly malleable and easily adaptable to fit modern realities in a way that would have been impossible with an exclusive focus on French-Canadian ethnicity and Diaspora lineage.

## CHAPTER 4 PUBLIC PROMOTION OF CAJUN IDENTITY

Heretofore, the emphases in this essay have been on the folkloristic activities of families, communities and informal associations. The discussion now concerns the official or quasi-official effort to enhance the dignity and heart of Cajun culture. These measures date back primarily to the 1960s and were related to the more general effects of pride in ethnic identities found throughout the United States. In a sense, the valorization of Cajun culture was a reaction to the commonly-held view (however good-natured) of the Cajun as a fun-loving, heavy drinking, swamp boy. Originally, the widely-used term “coonass” went from an accepted description to an insult (especially when used by non-Cajuns). Traditional Cajun storytellers, using heavy dialects for humorous effect, were perceived by some as creating an image of innocent naivete if not ignorance. The response of Acadiana’s political and elite society system was to change the negative images and to reimagine a sense of Cajunness that would recognize its dignity and distinctiveness.

### The Politics of Language

The first step was to reestablish the French language as the characteristic of Cajun identity. For Congressman James (Jimmy) Domengeaux, “French is a native language in Louisiana and is not at all a foreign language” (Benard, 2003: 154). Regardless, early twentieth-century educational policies certainly devalued the French language. In 1916, the State Board of Education prohibited the speaking of French in the public schools. The 1921 State Constitution established English as the sole official language--casting aside earlier constitutional provisions that had accorded French the status of an official language of the state (Natsis, 1999: 326). Consistent with broader measures throughout the United States to “Americanize” those not of Anglo-Saxon descent, a policy of unilingualism imposed strong penalties on those who persisted in using the French language.

Unfortunately, Cajun speakers were considered to be backward, classified as second-class citizens and suffered numerous personal insults for speaking in *la langue de la famille*. Through the major efforts of Congressman Domengeaux and Governor Edwin Edwards, the Louisiana Legislature passed Legislative Act 409 in 1967 to create the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (*le Conseil pour le développement du français en Louisiane*). CODOFIL, chaired by Domengeaux for twenty years, was empowered to “do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization and preservation of the French language as found in Louisiana, for the cultural, economic and touristic benefit of the state” (Act 409). Additionally, the following guidelines were established:

- recommending the teaching of French in the first 5 years of elementary school, and three years in high school (Act 408);
- requiring that universities produce qualified teachers in elementary French (Act 458);
- recognizing the French language as official and authorizing publication of legal notices in French (Act 256);
- authorizing the establishment of a nonprofit French-language television station (Act 458)

CODOFIL’s express purpose was to prevent, or at least to arrest, the decline of the French language in Louisiana. Its objectives, however, were contradictory. School boards could request that they be exempted from the French language teaching specified in Act 408. Also, CODOFIL believed that standard French instruction should be the primary approach to language instruction. Finally, Cajun revivalists were unhappy with CODOFIL’s emphasis on pure-French instruction and “wanted to redirect the organization’s objectives to causes specifically related to Cajun-French identity” (Sexton, 1999: 309). Whatever legal and political success that was gained for the goal of French language usage, CODOFIL has been unable to realize popular upswing support among average Cajuns.

Unfortunately, little was left of the true French language in Louisiana, so pedagogical efforts required starting virtually from scratch. However, CODOFIL played a major part in the



furtherance of French heritage and language and hiring native French speakers as teachers in the public schools. CODOFIL also supports community assistance to enhance public recognition of Cajun culture. In effect, CODFIL's greatest success was reasserting the French heritage of Acadiana. Given the homogenizing nature of American mass culture, this is a commendable accomplishment. Even if the pure Cajun or the French language survives as only folklore, their survival is important for a continued awareness of the Cajun identity of Acadiana.

### Folklife Programs

Formally known as the University of Southwestern Louisiana, the University of Louisiana-Lafayette (ULL) has provided an educational anchor for the region. While the student body is not exclusively Cajun (although by some estimates 90% of students are from the immediate Acadiana region), the University has a manifestly self-conscious sense of its Cajun identity. (For example, the athletic teams are known as the "Ragin Cajuns.") The university also provides graduate education in Folklife Studies through the Department of English and Francophone Studies. While not geographically restrictive, there is a strong emphasis on the study of the cultural heritage of Louisiana reflecting the widespread characterization of Louisiana as a "folklore land." This scholarship is aided by the availability of the Archives of Acadiana and Creole Folklore in the Dupré Library. ULL's Center for Louisiana Studies engages in a variety of interpretive programs such as publications (books and pamphlets), exhibitions, lectures and classroom demonstrations. These activities are designed primarily with out-reach in mind, that is, to acquaint students, scholars and the general public with the rich cultural heritage of Acadiana.

Fortunately for the Cajuns the University of Louisiana-Lafayette has been an educational center and intellectual beacon for Acadiana. As with Moncton, its scholars and research centers have been at the heart of the Cajun cultural renaissance since the 1960s. Indeed, inspired by the

events in New Brunswick, a small but influential group of Louisianan intellectuals set out to revive a pan-Acadian identity. Unlike CODOFIL, these actions “had few inhibitions about proclaiming Cajun-French nationalism” (Lewis, 1996: 74). The Center for Louisiana Studies at ULL published a series of original creative writings in 1980 entitled “*Les Éditions de la Nouvelle Acadie.*” In 1991, Louisiana signed an agreement for cultural and educational exchanges with the Maritime Province.



**Figure 27: University of Louisiana-Lafayette Administrative Building**

The State Division of the Arts houses a Regional Folklife Program, which is a cooperative endeavor between the Arts Division and the state’s universities, through grants that promote the following goals:

- to identify and document folk cultural traditions and artists;
- to work with community groups to present their folk traditions to the public;
- to provide information about folklife through media coverage, university lectures, and public presentations;

Because it was realized that the folk art traditions of Louisiana were basic to the cultural life of the state and of great significance beyond its borders, the Division hired a Folk Arts Coordinator for the first time in 1978 to encourage approaches to cultural tourism and conservation that would not exploit these resources in a way that would endanger traditional values.

The Acadiana Arts Council, which serves the eight parishes of the “Cajun Heartland”--Acadia, Evangeline, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, and Vermillion--actively promotes the region’s cultural distinctiveness from considerations of both community awareness and heritage tourism. This entails supporting and showcasing Cajun music and cuisine as well as folk and contemporary arts.

#### The Catholic Church

Roman Catholicism is the traditional religion of the Cajun people and its influence is evident in the grand churches found in small towns and the large number of Catholic schools. In some Acadiana parishes, Catholic priests bless the crops such as the sugar fields in Iberia Parish. The blessing of the fleet in Delcambre (Vermillion Parish) is a major event. It is not uncommon for restaurants in the region to advertise fish on Friday as “Lenten specials,” and “King Cakes” made between the Epiphany and Mardi Gras are a staple item of the pre-Carnival (more accurately, the Advent) season. There are also religious practices such as elaborately decorated altars for St. Joseph’s Day (March 19); painting family burial sites on *La Toussaint* (All Saints’ Day, November 1). A number of homes in Acadiana will have statues of the Virgin Mary on their front lawns. The Virgin is a particularly important religious icon because of Pope Pius XI’s 1938 designation of Our Lady of the Assumption (celebrated on August 15) as the patron saint of the Acadians (including the Cajuns).



**Figure 28: St. John's Catholic Cathedral, Lafayette**

While the overwhelming preponderance of Catholic communicants and the ethos of Catholicity have diminished--both from non-practice and allegiance to Protestant evangelical churches--Catholicism continues to be an important element of regional identity. Certainly, when French-speaking Cajuns were deemed ignorant and backward, the Catholic clergy and its institutional structures provided a sense of place and dignity. Especially in the small communities that are still characteristic of Acadiana, the Catholic Church served as an important vehicle of solidarity and social control. "Thus Catholicism can be conceived of as serving the needs of Cajuns, an ethnic group committed to the conservative goal of cultural survival for lifestyles rooted in a complex system of friendship and kinship networks involving subsistence activities" (Clarke, 1985: 385).

### Coda: The Cajun Patrimony

Unquestionably, Cajun identity, primarily through the efforts of ULL, is patrimonial: stressing language, folklore, religion. Instead of income level, educational achievement, and occupational status, the indicators of Cajun identity have a strong element of shared values that are traditional. Any weakening of these patrimonial elements--the decline of French speakers, the presence of contemporary styles of living, the lessening of Catholic moral authority--would appear to threaten the survival of Cajun identity. Consequently, public programs designed to promote Cajun culture are often explicitly protectionist in nature. However, these policies run the risk of cultural commodification usually rationalized as benefiting heritage tourism.

As cultures become less insular they adapt to the newer society they join, that is, they accommodate to the broader societal forces with which they must interact. Cultures must be accepting of changing circumstances or retreat into a fairy-tale provincialism. Cultural authenticity must necessarily be judged with valuational standards that recognize that many customs are at best approximations of traditional practices. The important issue is the degree of success that Cajun culture has enjoyed in the acts of accommodation and that the cultural navigation system has been steered by Cajuns themselves.

The example of festivals in Acadiana discussed earlier provides a good example of adoption and accommodation. Generally, the festivals were associated with the promotion of an agricultural product (such as sugar and rice) that was a pillar of the local economy. As the economic significance of agriculture declined, the festivals were transformed to into celebrations of communal identity. One can argue that, since identity was not an issue associated with the festivals' creation, the current manifestations are false. On the other hand, what is so authentic about product promotion? That a festival has modified its activities to become a community event is arguably a timely accommodation to a changed reality. What is really important is that

the festival is seen by its participants as something that belongs to their heritage (however imagined) and celebrates their identity (however constructed).

In 1955, the Bicentennial of *le Grand Dérangement* was memorialized in local festivities and a “pilgrimage” to Moncton. However, the parades and pageants organized throughout southern Louisiana showed a deep unease about the future of Acadian culture (Lewis, 1996: 71). A poem by Ruth S. Means entitled “Exodus,” written for the Bicentennial Celebration, lamented a disappearing culture.

They disappeared from L’Acadie when England’s army came,  
And now they face a new invader – Progress is the name.  
It has become almost passé to speak the bayou French;  
The pungent smell of fishing has become an oilfield stench.  
The young ones – do they care about the weekly fais-do-do?  
Mais non! They have a television – at least a radio!  
The good French names - Alcee – Achille – so very few you meet.  
The once abounding Jean Pierre’s are not plain Jack or Pete.  
Weep on, Evangeline, for him you sought across a nation,  
And weep for us who love the past, but hardly find Cajun!

(Louisiana Poetry Society, Lyric Louisiana: A Collection of Poems Honoring the Acadian Bicentennial Celebration of 1955).

This poem demonstrates that the Cajuns have regained a proper sense of pride in their unique culture even if the Acadian revivalist movement failed in its efforts as a full-blown cultural renaissance. However, for the ordinary Cajun in Southwest Louisiana, these cultural nuances are of little significance. “The Crawfish and the accordion are the universal symbols of ‘French’ food and music, and are as characteristic of the region as ‘Cajun’ is a registered trademark for the products of southwestern Louisiana” (Lewis, 1996: 80).

## CONCLUDING CODA: REFLECTIONS ON CAJUN CULTURE

The purpose of this paper has not been to write a history of Acadiana. Rather, the goal has been to understand the distinct character of Cajun culture and the Acadiana region with reference to its folkways and traditional customs. The creative framework reflects the more anthropological sense of culture defined as a way of life. Overall, Cajun culture is associated with the ways in which people live as a community, with definitive customs, and well-established traditions. It is a living culture that easily creates a sense of identity--personal and communal. The maintenance of this identity is linked to symbolic activities that are representative of group commonality. Language, religion, food and music are examples of cultural activities that provide such symbolic links. Equally important are folkloric expressions such as crafts, tales and holiday rituals. All are traditional elements that contribute to the formation of the group solidarity necessary for what is a “particular” identity within a more homogenized American scene.

In essence, this paper portrays Acadiana as a distinctive cultural region and the Cajuns as a culturally distinct population in contemporary America. There is an understandable belief by some that this culture has been rendered *ersatz*, that is, what is called Cajun today is a diminished imitation of the authentic folk culture. However, all cultures evolve through adaptation and accommodation to changes in the overall social and material environment. Folk cultures are often held accountable to a standard of authenticity that seems to require their being museums of a lost past. What is of greater importance is how a sense of cultural distinctiveness informs a sense of Cajunness as a distinct identity--how a shared cultural outlook shapes modes of both internal and external recognition.

An over-emphasis on what constitutes the authenticity of a folk culture may impede an appreciation of its real value. Essentially, there are two views on this matter: (1) a “strict-

construction preservationism;” and, (2) a “loose-construction preservationism.” This interpretational distinction can be demonstrated by the following examples:

- When a Cajun fish seller has a *cochon de lait* for business purposes is he carrying on the same culinary tradition as what was originally a celebration for extended family and neighbors?
- When a young bride learns traditional recipes using a regional cookbook--rather than from her mother and grandmother--is she rediscovering folkloric cuisine or creating a culinary simulacrum? (See Guitierrez, 1985: 156)

A “strict-construction preservationist” would doubtless respond “No” to both questions.

The *cochon de lait* has been taken out of its familial context and rendered into a promotional event; the cookbook-trained bride is not engaging traditional culinary methods, but relying on a form of “hear-say.” A “loose-construction preservationist” would answer “Yes” by arguing that a traditional festivity is simply being adapted to a modern context and the cookbook-taught bride is using a learning tool in the absence of the possibility of direct transmission from her family (Guitierrez, 1985: 158).

These are certainly difficult questions to answer definitively; furthermore, all dichotomies can obscure nuances. However, the overall concept of this essay has been that culture must be understood not just as a matter of historical fidelity, “but how it continues to survive” and how such traditional customs continue to affect our lives (Gregory, 1985: 193). In this context, a “strict-constructionist” approach to a living folk culture is essentially a cultural *cul de sac* that would freeze aesthetic expressions in some form that has at best a contentious claim to what is its authentic substance.

There are of course serious dangers presented by the commodification of traditional rituals. However, the adaptation of the customary to fit a changed social milieu is not the same as the cooptation of a traditional custom for the purpose of enhancing private profit. In the former, the custom remains in the custody of its community and persists as a marker of communal



identity. In the latter case, the meaning of the custom is distorted to enhance marketability and consumer satisfaction. The “Mardi Gras Digest,” which is a news source committed to research about Carnival traditions, examines the transmogrification of the “King Cake” as an interesting case study.

The King Cake has been a longtime ritual associated with the Catholic feast day of the Epiphany (January 6) when the Christ-child was adored by the Magi. As the Twelfth Night of the Christmas liturgical season, this day marked the end of the associated festivities. The customary tradition was to serve a King Cake, whose importance was as a symbol, not as a food item. The cake’s flour was usually dry; there was no filling or flavoring of any sort. However, with the commercialization of Christmas (and the celebration of Santa Claus rather than the Incarnation), the Epiphany became an afterthought whose meaning has become increasingly unclear. Accordingly, January 6 became celebrated as the commencement of the Carnival season and “the sacred roots of the custom have been overshadowed by the king cake’s connection with Mardi Gras, a pre-Lenten secular celebration” (Mardi Gras Digest: 1).



**Figure 29: King Cake**



**Figure 30: Cross Section of King Cake**

Even the meaning of the colors of the cake's icing--purple, green, gold--have become associated with those of the Krewe of Rex. As the official Mardi Gras colors, these signify justice (purple), faith (green) and power (gold). However, their original association was with the color of the vestments worn by Catholic priests during the forty days of Lent. (Purple and green are penitential colors; gold vestments are worn on Sundays in Lent since these days are exempt from the penitential rule.) In all this, the king cake ceased to have any liturgical associations with the feast of the Epiphany and became a Mardi Gras novelty. The cake is not served on just the feast-day, but throughout the pre-Lenten season. What has been a religious symbol--infused with sacred meaning and the associated dignity--became a trivialized commodity to be "consumed" rather than "revered."

This commodification of the King Cake was associated with its exponential commercialization since the 1980s. As efficient means of packaging and delivery were developed, bakeries could ship the cake nationwide--to native Louisianans living elsewhere and, increasingly, to others attracted to it as a festive novelty. Since the cake became a food item, its

taste was enhanced with a variety of fillings. The baby, which was traditionally baked in the cake to symbolize the difficulty that the Three Kings had in finding the Christ-child, is now left in the box for later insertion to diminish legal liability. Where once the person who had the piece with the baby was given a paper crown to wear, it now marks an obligation to buy the next cake. In effect, this serves to promote increased consumption and enhanced bakery sales. The King Cake has not only been secularized, but is also a big business.

All of this may seem like too harsh an indictment of what is, after all, the occasion for casual gatherings in offices and homes to share the cake. The contemporary variant of the King Cake can hardly be condemned as a subversive activity and it may, in fact, serve to promote bonds of friendship in an easy-going fashion. However, the fate of the King Cake does serve as a cautionary tale for what can be the worst-case example of cultural de-authentication. It is not an example of how a traditional custom is adapted to changing sensibilities; rather, it represents the irrevocable loss of a long-established tradition. This is in marked contrast to the case of the festivals that were previously discussed. If these have lost their original association with the promotion of local agricultural products, their current status as celebrations of local identity are reasonable adaptations that do not negate the sense of the original meaning as communal rites.

Certainly, there is a question of boundary maintenance and the rights of traditional ownership. What should be noted is, notwithstanding the powerful forces of commercialization and commodification, that Cajun culture and Cajunness has survived. This reflects a tremendous resilience--as well as a capacity for creative adaption and accommodation--in the face of the powerful forces of cultural homogenization. There can be little doubt that Acadiana represents an authentic cultural sub-region within the United States. The survival of such a clearly defined geographic entity with distinctive folkways is decidedly rare in modern America. To paraphrase

the purpose of the Museum of the American Indians in Washington, the endurance and popularity of Cajun folkways says that: “We Are Still Here.”

Two previously-discussed explanations for the survival of a distinct Cajun identity bear repeating. First is the demographic datum that 77% of Cajuns continue to live in Acadiana and a large number of the remainder are in other parts of Louisiana or in nearby areas of Texas. Consequently, a large population base persists. Second, the years since the 1960s saw an incredibly active cultural renaissance that possessed grass-roots origins and greatly contributed to the validation of Cajun culture and identity. Most significant, the Cajuns have maintained a sense of self and the inhabitants of Acadiana have a palpable pride of place. Jake Delhomme, the NFL quarterback, described his home, Breaux Bridge, and the surrounding region, as “magical.” This might stand as the best witness to the vitality of Cajun cultural survival.

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## **VITA**

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